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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS: AN UPDATE FROM THE FRONT LINE

REF: A. KUWAIT 1907

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 1901

[1](#)C. KUWAIT 1863

[1](#)D. 04 KUWAIT 4540

Classified By: DCM Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Two female women's rights delegations met with Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on May 9 to discuss the GOK's position on the issue of women's political rights. Both groups pledged not to discuss the details of the meeting and promised not to protest or rally in support of women's political rights before the May 16 session. Despite public assurances from Interior Minister Nawaf Al-Ahmad of the GOK's intent to grant Kuwaiti women full political rights, and PM Shaykh Sabah's public confidence in the success of the municipal rights legislation in the upcoming May 16 session of Parliament, many women still privately expressed doubts about the outcome of the women's rights legislation (ref C). Although some still oppose legislation granting women political rights at the Municipal Council level, all pledged to continue to pursue national level political rights. End Summary

PM Requests Silence, Delivers Only Vague Assurances

[1](#)2. (U) Two groups of women's rights activists met with PM Shaykh Sabah at the Council of Ministers on May 9 to discuss the status of women's political rights in Kuwait. The first delegation was led by Shaykha Latifa Al-Fahad Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the chair of the Kuwaiti Union of Women's Societies and the second by Shaykha Dr. Souad bint Mohammed Al-Sabah. (Note: Shaykha Latifa Al-Fahad Al-Salem Al-Sabah is the granddaughter of Amir Shaykh Salem (1917-1921) and the only wife of current Kuwaiti Crown Prince Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. Shaykha Souad bint Mohammed, mother of young and influential Shaykh Mohammed Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak (ref D), was married to Abdullah Al-Mubarak, son of Kuwaiti Amir Mubarak the Great (1896-1915). End Note.) The second group also included prominent liberal women's activists Dr. Ma'souma Mubarak, Dr. Rola Dashti, Maha Al-Barges, and Kawthar Al-Jou'aan. All women involved acceded to PM Shaykh Sabah's request to not speak publicly about the details of the meeting and to not agitate for women's rights before the May 16 session of Parliament, during which the issue of municipal level political rights is expected to come to the floor for debate and a possible vote.

[1](#)3. (C) Kuwait University political science professor and women's rights activist Dr. Ma'souma Mubarak told EmbOff that nothing tangible resulted from the meeting and that PM Shaykh Sabah gave nothing more than the promise to keep pressing on the issue of women's rights. She confided that all women present agreed to not escalate efforts or rhetoric in the run-up to the May 16 Parliamentary session. Dr. Ma'souma said that this weakened their position because they were planning to intensify efforts in the coming week but would not now because of the promise.

[1](#)4. (C) Women's rights activist and head of the Kuwait Economics Society Dr. Rola Dashti told EmbOff that the meeting with PM Shaykh Sabah was not encouraging. Her impression was that the PM was only concerned about passing the municipal rights bill and was not serious about women's national political rights. She said he expressed unhappiness over the statements issued by women's right's activists and liberal NGOs urging the defeat of the Municipal Council rights legislation (ref C). Dr. Rola said that the PM referred to her as "a troublemaker" when shaking hands. She is concerned that accepting only municipal level rights would freeze the rights movement until 2009, when the next Municipal Council elections are scheduled to be held. Dr. Rola asked PM Shaykh Sabah during the meeting to refer the issue to the constitutional court if nothing can be done on the matter in Parliament. (Note and Comment: Article one of the election law limits national level political rights to men, despite the fact that Kuwait's Constitution makes no distinction between men and women in Article 80, which calls for "universal suffrage" and in Article 82, which states that "a member of the National Assembly shall be a Kuwaiti by

origin in accordance with law." Referring the election law to the constitutional court is a risky endeavor. If the court upholds the current election law, then conservatives will be armed with a legal ruling against women's suffrage. If the court were to declare the election law unconstitutional, thus according Kuwaiti women full political rights, the opposition may claim that the court was influenced or that it has no right to make social law that contradicts their version of Shari'a. They are also likely to argue that it is better to gain parliamentary consensus on the issue if the society is to accept the change. End Note and Comment.)

15. (C) Activist Maha Al-Barges told EmbOff that the women all agreed to not discuss the details of their meeting with the PM. That said, she divulged to EmbOff that PM Shaykh Sabah promised to pass the municipal rights legislation on May 16 and to keep pressing for full political rights. The PM cautioned, however, that full political rights may not be realized during this year's parliamentary session which is scheduled to end on June 28.

16. (C) Activist and attorney Kawthar Al-Jou'aan said the meeting was a good one and that she believes the PM is serious about pursuing women's political rights, although she believes some of his ministers may not be supportive of the measure. She told EmbOff that it was the first time she has felt "optimistic about (women's) rights."

#### The Strike That Struck Out

17. (SBU) A rally and women's work strike planned for May 8 never materialized (ref B). The rally and strike were intended, at least by some, to pressure the GOK to support national level political rights for women. Others did not actively support the rally or the strike and were not surprised at its failure.

-- Maha Al-Barges told EmbOff that there was no coordination on any strike, rally, or work stoppage.

-- Dr. Ma'souma Mubarak remarked that the idea's short notice and weak planning led to its failure saying that it wasn't realistic "for Kuwaiti women to gather on a request in less than 48 hours."

-- Dr. Rola Dashti told EmbOff that "the intention was not to stage a rally or a sit-in. We left it to each woman to adopt a suitable position she deemed fit."

-- Activist Shaykha Al-Nisf said that holding a strike, particularly in front of the National Assembly would be "useless" and would not lead to women gaining their rights.

#### Next Steps

18. (C) All women publicly and privately vowed to continue pressing for women's national political rights. Some like Maha Al-Barges, told EmbOff that women will not oppose the municipal rights bill but they will continue to push for national level political rights. Others are likely to continue opposing the municipal level legislation viewing it as a half-measure that ignores the absence of the more relevant Parliamentary rights. In addition, should the measure pass, women would not be eligible to participate in the Municipal Council elections until 2009. While Dr. Rola Dashti remains hopeful, she believes that certain elements within the GOK are opposing the PM's efforts. She appealed publicly to PM Shaykh Sabah to "foil a major conspiracy being hatched by a number of leading ministers against women's rights." She also appealed to the U.S. to refuse to receive the Prime Minister who plans to visit Washington in July.

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